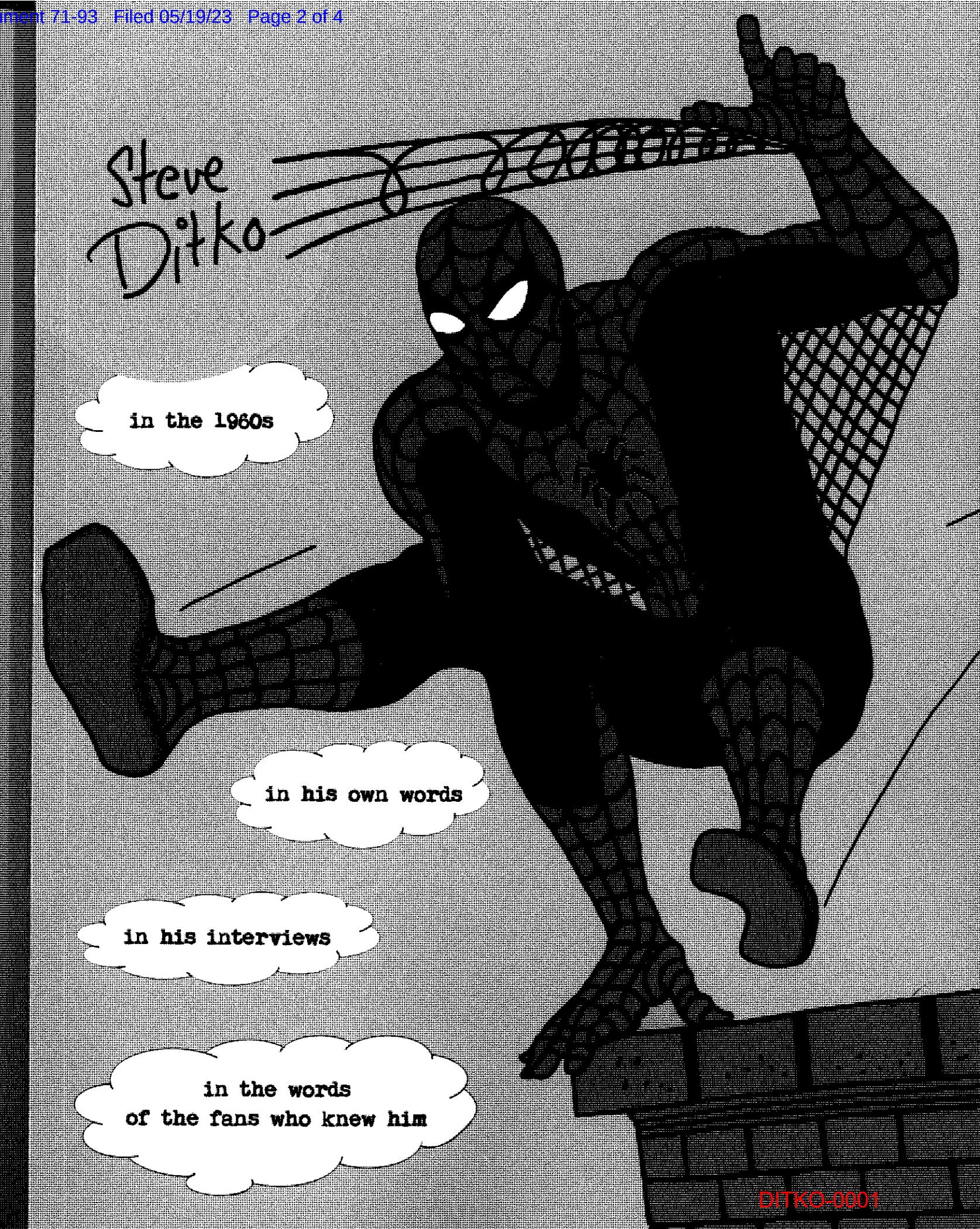


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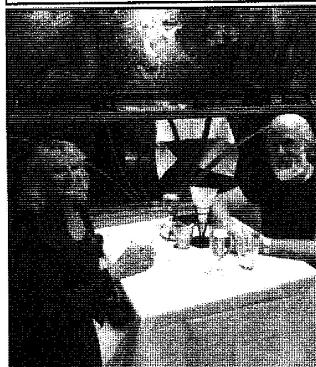
Steve Ditko and Memories of Another Day

by
Bernie Bubnis



Above: Bernie at the 2017 New York Comic Con - more than 53 years after he and his friends founded the first comic convention ever - also in New York but way back in 1964. Bernie's shirt commemorates that historic first con with an image of its iconic button.

Below: After the convention, Bernie and his wife Lucille enjoy a drink at Victor's Cuban Café, a place that reminded Bernie of Steve Ditko's studio - which was located right around the corner.
Photos are courtesy of Lucille Bubnis.



I first met Steve Ditko in 1962. The last time I saw him was October 2017, and that is where this story begins. The New York Comic Con at the Javits Center was a circus of people. I was flipping through some original artwork stacked on two tables. Every other moment someone bumped into me, and it was getting crowded. So crowded that it started to bother me. A guy in a Spider-Man costume offered to climb on my shoulders so my wife could get a better photo. *Just take the photo with him next to me, please, I thought.*

I was ready for lunch. My wife and I left Javits and headed to a restaurant on West 52nd Street we remembered from years ago. *Please, please make it still be there.* Victor's Cuban Café was still there, and it brought back memories of joining a conga line led by Roberto Duran (Victor's boxer cousin) and dancing into the night. Honestly, remembering a good moment in your life is a magic pill, and I started remembering a lot of good moments with artist and writer Steve Ditko.

I seemed to recall, *Wasn't his studio around the corner?*

I had corresponded with him over the years, but those letters were few and far between. My last in-person meeting with him was in August 1964. I was just a kid and growing up back then, and life's responsibilities had taken control of my time.

Our correspondence became more consistent in 2014, the year the New York Comic Con would host a panel called "Survivors of the 1964 Comicon." I knew he would want to be there. (Hey, what do I know? I'm a dreamer.) As it turned out he *didn't* want to be there, but his hand-written letters would make me wait patiently for the next envelope from him to arrive in my mailbox.

So in 2017, I tried calling him. *Please, please make him answer his phone.* His hearing was bad, and he admitted it. Mine is bad, and I *don't* admit it. My wife took the phone and let him know we would be coming by. His studio / office was located at 1650 Broadway, and the entry was from West 51st Street. A guy at the front desk asked if we had an appointment, and we did, so he pointed us to the elevators. Before his floor, the doors opened and in stepped someone I knew.

"Steve, it's me - Bernie."

He looked confused, so my wife increased the volume, "IT'S BERNIE BUBNIS FROM THE 1964 COMICON!!!"

He stared and said, "You look different."

I didn't know if he was kidding, and I started laughing. "It's been over fifty years."

He grinned and said, "It matters."

We shook hands.

I don't think he was kidding.

The reason he was on the elevator was because his studio did not have a bathroom. He had to go to another floor. Before he would let us in, he looked at my wife and said, "You can stay out here if you are going to take more pictures."

My wife had to bite her tongue and ego. Without saying a word, she pocketed her camera. I was so happy my wife loved me enough to not be herself at that moment. I wanted nothing to ruin this day.

Nothing.

I am so glad she took those photos. I can look at them now and remember the moments I had spent with Steve Ditko over a half century ago. I do not have any photos from the early days when I first met him - just memories, memories of a good man whose life intersected with the life of a lost kid. Memories of just why seeing him one last time was so important to me.

It all started in 1962 when I asked Trudy Ross at Marvel for permission to re-create a Human Torch story from the 1950s in my fanzine *Comic Heroes Revisited*. [At that time, in early 1962, Trudy Ross was Stan Lee's secretary, a full year before Flo Steinberg began working for Stan in 1963. Bernie wanted to publish in his fanzine a Human Torch / Sub-Mariner piece "Fire Vs. Water, Twice Over" by George Paul, which summarized the epic confrontation between the Human Torch and the Sub-Mariner back in *Marvel Mystery Comics* #8 to #10, and he also wanted to re-present a five-page Human Torch story, "A Spy There Was..." from *The Human Torch* #37 (June 1954).] When Trudy called me back with permission to do the story, I told her that I would send her and Stan a copy of the zine. Would she want more?

She replied, "How about one for Steve?"

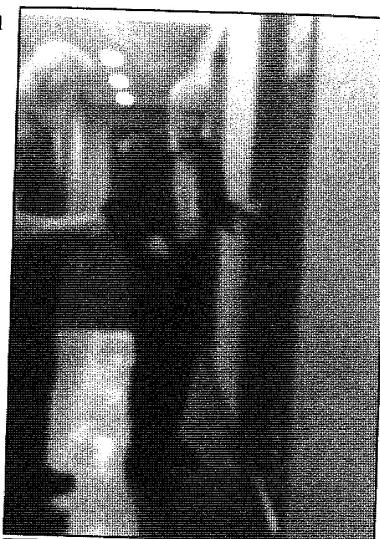
Silence. "Huh? Who? Steve who?" I asked.

Trudy replied, "Steve Ditko. Didn't he draw the story?"

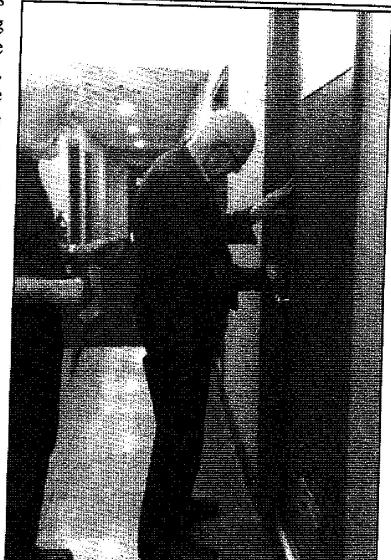
"I don't think so...I don't know..." I really did not know *who* drew it. Maybe he did. "Sure, I'll send a copy for him also."

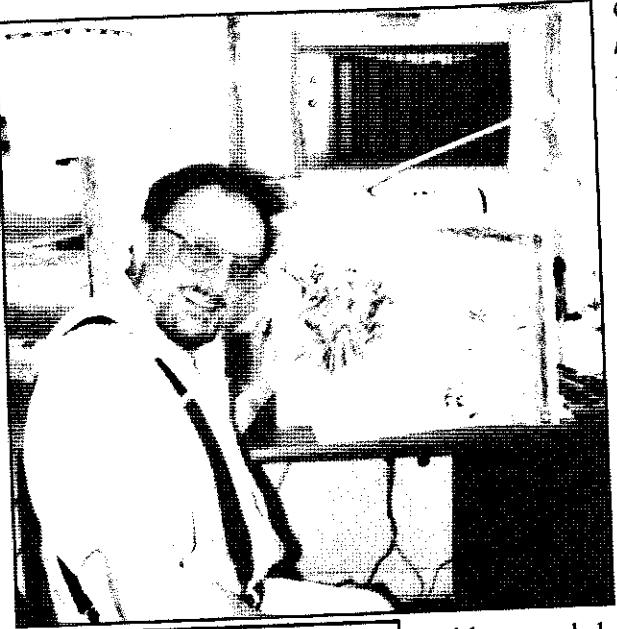
Trudy added, "Well, give him a call and make sure. You don't want to waste money on a copy."

I asked if he was there at the office. She said, "No, but he *is* in the phone book."



Above and below: Steve Ditko approaches his studio / office door during Bernie's 2017 visit. Photos are courtesy of Lucille Bubnis.





Above: Artist Eric Stanton. Eric shared a studio with Steve Ditko in the 1960s on West 43rd Street in Manhattan. The artists were the best of friends and often helped each other on their projects when deadlines loomed. Eric was often in the office when Bernie visited in the early 1960s and even called Flo Steinberg on Steve's behalf to help him get a date with the new Marvel secretary.

Below: Marvel secretary Flo Steinberg. She said "no" when Steve Ditko asked her on a date and re-affirmed the "no" when Steve's friend Eric called her. Steve and Flo remained friendly, however, and even sat together at the 1964 New York Comicon.



questions, he pointed at Eric and said, "Don't mention him." They both laughed, but I knew he meant it, and I never did include him in the article.

More than once I saw Steve's art pages sitting atop Eric Stanton's desk. I know he inked at least some Spider-Man backgrounds. I thought this because I could never imagine Steve letting *anyone* else ink Spider-Man. Eric did not seem to have any secrets, except that he was Steve's secret. Eric never stopped working just because I entered. He would always talk but made no attempt to cover up or move art even if it was a Spider-Man page. Only once did I see a page on Steve's desk that surprised me. Years later I found out it was page 21 of Stanton's *Sweeter Gwen* serial. Steve knew I could clearly see it, but without a word he flipped it over and never took his eyes from mine. I just thought it was a Stanton page on his desk. I never

said a word, but when I saw it again ten years later I then knew Steve had helped with the inking. His style hits you like a sledgehammer.

When I knew them, they acted like two kids with Steve playing the straight man to a Stanton joke. That was never more evident than the day I walked in on them as Steve was taking some heavy kidding from Eric: "Maybe she thinks you're too handsome." Eric was laughing. Steve was grinning with embarrassed red cheeks puffed up on his face. Eric joked, "Go back. This time wear a wig."

All I knew was that I had walked in on something to do with Steve's love life, and the jabs continued for a few minutes. Until they weren't funny any longer, and Eric knew it. He tried to console Steve then. "Hey, at least you tried. Don't worry about it."

Steve resumed his almost constant position at his drawing table. His smile slowly disappearing.

By this time Stan Lee's new secretary was Flo Steinberg. I learned later that Steve had asked her to lunch. She politely said "no." I was only fourteen at the time, but I *did* understand rejection. That day Steve Ditko had the look of a fourteen-year-old boy. One who just got turned down by the prettiest girl in the class.

Years and years later, I asked Flo if Steve ever asked her out more than once. She said, "Probably, but times were different then. You didn't date fellow employees." I remembered something else about Eric and Steve. When I spoke to Flo about Steve inviting her to lunch, she told me something I found touching. Eric had called her up directly to plead for Steve. Eric and Steve were true buddies at that time, and it was a shame that, in later years, working from separate locations forced them to see less of each other. But Flo said Eric's call did not change her mind. I could not help but ask if she would have said "yes" if they

did not work together. I never remember a discouraging word from Flo, and this answer was no different: "Bernie, sometimes the answer is just 'no.'" She pooh-poohed the whole thing, and we dropped the subject. Sorry, Steve.

One day I knocked a few times at Steve's studio door and got no answer. I turned the knob, slowly opened the door, and entered. I saw that Steve was on the phone. He stared out the large windows by his desk and kept the phone pressed against his ear. Lots of dead silence, then a "Yes." Another minute and then a loud "No!" He looked into the phone and yelled, "I can't do that!" and slammed the receiver into its base. "They want everything yesterday." He went back to drawing as if I wasn't there. For all the horror stories he did, it was just a job. If he was tortured by anything, it was deadlines.

I had become accustomed to Steve Ditko's wordless stares. I knew when they meant, "So...go ahead..." or "I'm busy right now." Why waste words? He never did.

It is why my article on him that appeared in *RBCC* #31 was so hard to write. He made me work for every word. His one word answers begged me to ask every question twice, sometimes three times. I started to believe he enjoyed this game. We determined his first comic book work was "Stretching Things" in *Fantastic Fears* #5. I did not know it at the time, but a copy of that comic book sat on the shelves behind us. No effort was made to display it. He always seemed surprised that anyone would care about his career. The only thing important to him was on his drawing table...*that day*. He spoke more of people like Jack Kirby and Mort Meskin than he did of himself.

Not every visit to Steve's studio was a pleasant experience. On one occasion, my dark-framed glasses did little to hide the enormous blackened skin that encircled my right eye. The moment Eric saw me he howled, "What happened to you?" If I knew my next comment would ignite a firestorm, there is no way it would have come out of my mouth. "My father..." My voice just trailed off as I fought to find a better way to finish my sentence. Before I could blink, Steve had bounced from his chair and stood before me. I don't remember removing my glasses - I guess he did. It just happened. I was shocked to see him move so quickly.

The thought of my father bashing me this hard truly repulsed him. I had shown him photos of my father and grandfather. He even drew my father and put the drawing in one of his books for reference. He could not have guessed at that time the evil that my father represented. In those days kids got spankings, and that was your punishment for defying a parent. The fact that my father hit me so hard



Above: Bernie's ground-breaking interview with Steve Ditko revealed many interesting facts about the popular artist, such as the first comic story he drew was "Stretching Things," which appeared in *Fantastic Fears* Volume 1, Number 5 (above). Two stories that he drew *after* "Stretching Things" actually appeared in print *before* "Stretching Things," but "Stretching Things" was the first story he drew professionally. Below: Steve told Bernie that the artist he respected the most was Mort Meskin.

